

Kids' Views on Violence in the Media

George Spears¹, Ph.D and Kasia Seydegart¹, M.S.W.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Kids' Take on Media is a national study of Canadian children's and adolescents' experience with media. **Method:** The survey was designed and conducted by ERIN Research in spring, 2003 for the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) following consultation with the Media Awareness Network (MNet), and with funding from the National Crime Prevention Centre, Justice Canada. **Results:** While there is an extensive literature on the links between media violence and behaviour, this survey asks kids directly what they think: How attractive is media violence? Have they seen other kids imitate violent acts that they saw in the media? Do kids see media violence as harmful? **Conclusion:** Parental supervision of media use and family discussion of media issues have significant effects on kids' opinion regarding media violence. When families and significant others provide a framework for thinking about violence in media, kids are better equipped to assess an negative impact. **Key Words:** mass, media, violence, television, child, adolescent.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article est le résultat d'une étude canadienne auprès des enfants et des adolescents quant à leur perception des médias. Ce tour d'horizon fut pensé et réalisé par ERIN Research au printemps de 2003 pour la Fédération canadienne des enseignants et enseignantes suite à une consultation auprès du Réseau éducation-médias (le Réseau) et avec l'aide financière du Centre national de prévention du crime du ministère de la justice. À l'instar d'une littérature abondante sur les liens entre la violence dans les médias et le comportement, cette enquête demande directement aux enfants ce qu'ils pensent : Quel est l'attrait de la violence dans les médias? Ont-ils vu d'autres enfants imiter des actes violents à partir de ce dont ils avaient été témoins dans les médias? Est-ce que les enfants jugent dommageable la violence dans les médias? Le contrôle parental d'usage de presse et la discussion de famille de problèmes de presse a des effets significatifs d'opinion des gosses en ce qui concerne la violence de presse. Quand les familles et les autres significatifs fournissent un cadre pour penser de la violence dans les gosses de presse est mieux à équipé pour évaluer l'impact de any negative.

INTRODUCTION

There has now been a half-century of research on the effects that media violence may have on children. Two lines of inquiry predominate: whether media violence causes imitative violence or aggression, and whether media violence either sensitizes or desensitizes children to the experience of violence in real life. Canadian and international research is summarized in Gerbner and Morgan (2002), Josephson (1995), Martinez (1993) and Spears and Seydegart (1993).

The present research takes a different and largely uncharted course, asking kids themselves what they think happens. Is violence an attractive element of entertainment? Do kids themselves see others imitate violent acts seen in the media? Does

violence in the media contribute to violence in schools and communities? This paper reports a subset of results from Kids' Take on Media (Spears and Seydegart 2003), a national survey that locates the place of media in children's lives and assesses its relative importance among other activities.

Violence is a not an easily quantifiable concept, but each entertainment medium attempts to do so in the interest of protecting children. Television programs in Canada do not carry obvious ratings, but parents can use a "V-chip" to block programs that contain violence or coarse language. Movies are rated by provincial authorities with a "Restricted" rating in most provinces designating material not suitable for children. Video games sold today carry a rating by the U.S. Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB). Categories are "Early childhood", "Teen", "Everyone", "Mature" and "Adult". The latter is rarely, if ever, used. The "Mature" category includes games considered suitable for persons 17 and older that "may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language".

METHOD

Sample

The student sample was drawn from schools listed in KI-ES-KI, the Canadian Education Association's directory of publicly funded Canadian schools. Eight classes (one in each of grades 3 through 10) were selected from each of 36 school boards – a total of 288 classes. Boards were selected by region of the country in proportion to the population of that region: 4 boards in the Maritime provinces, 8 in Quebec, 12 in Ontario, 5 in the prairie provinces and 4 in B.C. One board was selected in each territory. Within each region, boards reflect the existing balance of English/French and urban/rural students. Some of the originally selected boards declined the invitation to participate and substitutions were made of boards with a similar student population. An attempt was made to reflect the differing character of schools within each board, resulting in a sample of 122 schools across the 36 boards.

Procedures

Two versions of the survey were produced, one for students in grades 7 to 10 and a slightly shorter version for students in grades 3 to 6. Survey content was developed by ERIN Research with input from the CTF and MNet.

Each teacher received a package containing comprehensive instructions for administering the survey, a set of parental consent forms and sufficient printed surveys for the class. Children completed the survey in class. Teachers in lower grades read questions aloud and answered queries about the meaning of survey questions and about how the survey should be completed. Confidentiality was stressed: teachers were asked not to look over children's shoulders and to seal the completed surveys in an envelope in front of the children.

The survey contained seven sections, three of which are discussed in this report. To assess the attractiveness of media

¹ERIN Research Inc, 5245 Eighth Line, Erin ON N0B 1T0
Corresponding Author: e-mail: kasia@erinresearch.com

territory of the 5,756 respondents. Totals are less than 5,756 in some instances as 4 percent of respondents did not answer one or more demographic questions. The grade three sample is smaller than intended and the grade 4 larger, as some schools substituted grade 4 classes for grade 3, on the basis that the survey could be difficult for grade 3 students.

How attractive is media violence?

The open-ended listing of favourites produced more than 500 different television program titles and more than 500 different game titles. Most of the favourites, however, fall into a rather small group. Sixteen titles account for one-half of all the television choices and 21 titles account for one-half of all the game choices.

Table 2 lists the three most popular titles by age and gender group. Within each of the 8 groups, the list of all favourite programs (most of which are not shown) would add to 100 percent. The three top-ranking television programs that are shown comprise from 20 to 32 percent of the total number of choices, depending on the group. provides parallel information for video games.

Kids rate their favourite television programs as exciting and funny, but not violent. "It has lots of violence" ranks last among the ten attributes for both boys and girls.

For video games, violence is the lowest-scoring attribute for girls, and near the middle of the set for boys. Among boys' 20 top-ranked game titles, there are five M-rated games: Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, Counter Strike, Halo, Medal of Honour, and Splinter Cell. While few girls listed any M-rated games among their three favourites, 50 percent of boys in grades 8 to 10 included at least one M-rated game.

Is there, then, a group of boys that is drawn to violent video

games? The 50 percent who chose at least one M-rated game among their three favourites breaks down as follows:

- 37 percent chose one M-rated game among their top three
- 12 percent chose two M-rated games
- 1 percent listed M-rated games for all three choices.

For the large majority of respondents, violence per se is not a strong attraction. Excitement and competition are primary appeals, and these qualities are found in very violent games as well as in sports games, adventure games, and others.

Do kids imitate violence in the media?

The survey asked the Grade 7 - 10 students (but not the younger ones) if they had ever witnessed someone imitate a violent act that they had learned from a movie or TV show, and if so, whether the act had resulted in injury. Fifty-one percent stated that they had witnessed imitation of some "violent act" from a movie or TV show. This proportion does not vary significantly by grade ($\chi^2=4.8$, 3 df, $p>.10$).

Follow-up discussions were held with members of the survey's age group to determine what kids understand by the term "violent act". Its meaning extends to any action that has the potential to cause harm, such as imitating a dangerous stunt. It does not necessarily mean aggressive or pre-meditated violence directed against another person.

Two-thirds of respondents reported that no one was hurt in the incident. The remaining 34 percent of respondents reported that some form of injury occurred. In these instances, the victim was:

- The person who acted in a violent manner (12 percent of • Someone else (17 percent of instances);
- Both (5 percent of instances).

Discussion

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Dimension	Number	Percent	Dimension	Number	Percent
Gender			Province/Territory		
Female	2,762	50	British Columbia	690	12
Male	2,750	50	Alberta	473	8
Total	5,512	100	Saskatchewan	155	3
Language			Manitoba	220	4
French	1,353	24	Ontario	2,131	37
English	4,403	76	Quebec	1,036	18
Total	5,756	100	New Brunswick	341	6
Grade			Prince Edward Island	151	3
Three	212	4	Nova Scotia	148	3
Four	973	18	Newfoundland & Labrador	178	3
Five	691	13	Yukon Territory	38	1
Six	702	13	Northwest Territories	146	2
Seven	726	13	Nunavut	48	1
Eight	717	13	Total	5,755	100
Nine	852	15			
Ten	664	12			
Total	5,537	100			

Note: Due to rounding, the summing of the categories may be slightly greater than 100%

The results of the regression analysis align for the most part with expectations. Family discussion of social issues in the media helps children recognize the harmful potential of media violence. Parental supervision of television viewing also plays an educational role. The gender difference (boys see less harm in media violence than girls) is consistent with the results on favourite video games. Boys play more M-rated games than girls and they also rate violence as a more prominent feature of their favourite television programs and video games than do girls.

The role of kids' emotional response to violent programs and movies is not clear. Those who experience fear when they see violent programs or movies tend to see media violence as having a negative impact on society, while those who say they feel pumped or excited by media violence do not. Does the experience of being frightened by violent material cause people to regard its impact as negative, or are people frightened more easily when they believe that violent material can be harmful to society? Perhaps both are true.

Therapists and caregivers should understand that kids

**Table 2. "Choose your three favourite TV programs"
Grades 3 – 6: English and French**

	Percent		Percent
Girls' choices	of choices	Boys' choices	of choices
Grades 3 – 6: English			
The Simpsons	8	The Simpsons	15
Lizzie McGuire	8	Yu-Gi-Oh!	9
The Amanda Show	6	Sports	6
Grades 3 – 6: French			
Star Académie	9	The Simpsons	9
Radio-Enfer	6	Sports	7
The Simpsons	5	Radio-Enfer	6
Grades 7 – 10: English			
Friends	17	The Simpsons	21
The Simpsons	10	Sports	6
That '70s Show	6	Friends	5
Grades 7 – 10: French			
Watatatow	9	The Simpsons	18

**Table 3. "Choose your three favourite video games"
Grades 3 – 6: English and French**

	Percent		Percent
Girls' choices	of choices	Boys' choices	of choices
Grades 3 – 6: English			
Mario	8	Hockey	6
The Sims	5	Racing	6
Harry Potter	3	Grand Theft Auto	5
Grades 3 – 6: French			
Mario	8	Racing	7
Miscellaneous Internet Games	4	Hockey	7
Racing	4	Mario	5
Grades 7 – 10: English			
The Sims	7	Grand Theft Auto	11
Mario	6	Hockey	6
Racing	3	Racing	6
Grades 7 – 10: French			
The Sims	8	Hockey	8
Mario	4	Racing	7

Table 4 . Attributes of kids' favourite television programs

Attribute	Agreement (0 – 100)			
	Girls		Boys	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Television programs				
It's exciting	74	27	76	28
It's funny	74	32	73	35
It makes me forget about my problems	61	34	62	35
My parents like this program too *	63	36	52	38
The characters do things I could never do in real life *	50	38	62	39
It's relaxing	53	33	55	36
I watch it for hours - I can't stop	51	37	54	38
I learn things I didn't know before	47	35	46	38
It makes me think	46	33	42	35
It has lots of violence *	20	31	38	37
Number of respondents	2,661		2,629	
Video games				
It's exciting *	78	29	89	22
I like beating other players, or my best score *	60	40	77	34
The characters do things I could never do in real life *	55	42	68	39
It makes me forget about my problems *	52	38	65	37
I play it for hours – I can't stop *	47	37	61	36
It makes me think	47	38	53	40
It's relaxing	48	35	52	38
It's funny	49	36	46	38
It has a lot of violence *	27	27	62	40
I think about my game even when I'm not playing it *	34	34	53	38
My parents like this game too *	43	36	33	36
I learn things I didn't know before *	31	31	41	38
Number of respondents	2,112		2,543	

* Statistically significant gender difference (1 df, $p < .005$ for television, $p < .0046$ for games).

Note: Bonferroni correction was used due to the multiple statistical tests.

look for excitement, humour, and competition in entertainment media. For boys particularly, violence in video games often comes as part of this package. At particular risk may be the small proportion of boys, 1 percent of those in grades 7 to 10, who listed violent games as all three of their favourites.

Kids need the tools to review their media consumption and patterns and to analyze how and why they use media. Significant people in kids' lives can help them critically look at their relationship to media, their volume of consumption and their choices. Talking to kids about fast food ads, the ways women or minorities are portrayed, the use and impact of violence in games and programs, the technique of using rapid scene changes to heighten excitement or the multi-level dialogue of The Simpsons will contribute to better balanced, more aware and more engaged young people.

This study was supported by The National Crime Convention Center

REFERENCES

Gerbner, G. & Morgan, M. (2002). Against the Mainstream: Selected Works of George Gerbner. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Josephson, W. (1995). Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages. Department of Canadian Heritage.

Martinez, A. (1992). Scientific Knowledge about Television Violence. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. Ottawa, ON.

Spears, G. & Seydegart, K. (2003). Kids' Take on Media. ERIN Research Inc. for the Canadian Teachers' Federation, <http://www.ctf-fce.ca>.

Spears, G. & Seydegart, K. (1993). Gender and Violence in the Mass Media. ERIN Research Inc. for National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Family Violence Prevention Division, Health Canada. Ottawa, ON.

Useful links

Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) <http://www.ctf-fce.ca> The full report of Kids' Take on Media can be downloaded, along with resources for teachers and parents and students.

Media Awareness Network (MNet) <http://www.media-awareness.ca>

Concerned Children's Advertisers (CCA) <http://www.cca-canada.com>

Positive Entertainment Alternatives for Children Everywhere (P.E.A.C.E.) <http://www.trop-peace.com>

instances);

Do kids see media violence as harmful?

Figure 1 shows the response of kids in grades 7 - 10 to four position statements. The first statement shows that kids are evenly divided as to the impact of media violence on behaviour - one-third agree that media violence contributes to violence in schools and communities, about one-third disagree, and the remainder are undecided.

The first, second and fourth of these statements are related

(Cronbach's Alpha = .74) and their sum reflects the potential for media violence having negative effects on society. This summed value was used as the dependent variable in a linear regression analysis.

As shown in the independent variables account for 22 per-cent of the variance in children's perception that media violence has potentially negative effects. Other influences that this study did not address, such as media education in schools and peer influences, may contribute further.

Figure 1. Response to position statements, Grades 7 to 10

Violence in media contributes to violence in schools and communities	35	32	33
There is too much violence in movies and on TV	51	28	21
My family often discusses what we watch on TV	53	30	17
There is too much violence in hockey games on TV	71	16	13

Table 5. Results of linear regression analysis

Variable	Beta	p<
1. Emotional response: "Violent movies and videos sometimes make me afraid" Fear is associated with a greater perceived impact of media violence	.21	.001
2. Family involvement in discussion of television Children who report that their families often discuss what they watch on TV are more likely to perceive an impact of media violence.	.16	.001
3. The degree to which parents supervise television viewing Greater parental supervision of TV viewing is associated with a greater perceived impact of media violence.	.16	.001
4. Gender Girls perceive greater negative impact of media violence.	.13	.001
5. The degree to which parents discuss violence, racism and sexism with children Discussion increases the perception that media violence can have a negative impact.	.11	.001
6. Emotional response: "Violent movies and videos make me feel pumped or excited" Kids who agree tend to deny that violence has any negative impact.	-.10	.001

R^2 (adjusted) = .22. Standardized values of Beta are reported. Standard error of the estimate = 22.7. Minimum tolerance = .819.

violence, participants wrote down the titles of their favourite TV programs and favourite video games. This open-ended method differs from the standard multiple-choice method, and ensures that the data include the full range of programs relevant to kids. Respondents then described their single most-liked television program and game, using 5-point response scales labelled Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree (see Table 4 for wording). Ten scales described the television program and 12 (the same ten plus two additional scales) described the game. Results are reported using a 0 – 100 scale. Correspondences between the 1 – 5 and 0 – 100 scales are 1 = 0, 2 = 25, 3 = 50, 4 = 75, and 5 = 100.

Two multiple choice questions inquired whether the respondent had seen anyone imitate violent acts witnessed in the entertainment media and what the consequences were.

Three related questions on 5-point Strongly Agree /Strongly Disagree scales were parceled to define the dependent variable, the respondent's attitude toward the effect of violence. They are:

- Violence in media contributes to violence in schools and communities
- The way people treat each other in movies and on TV contributes to bullying
- There is too much violence in movies and on TV.

Predictor variables are as follows:

- **Family involvement in discussion of television.** Agreement with the statement, "My family often discusses what we watch on TV" (5-point scale).
- **The degree to which parents discuss violence, racism and sexism with children.** This composite variable (values of 1,2,3,4) reflects whether participants could recall whether

er their parents or the adults they lived with had involved them in discussion of violence, racism and sexism in the entertainment media.

- **The degree to which parents supervise television viewing.** This composite variable combines two questions asking whether parents, "tell you which programs you can and cannot watch" and "tell you how long you can watch TV".
- **Emotional response to violent movies and videos:** Two items on 5-point Strongly Agree/Strongly Disagree scales express differing responses: "They sometimes make me afraid that someone will hurt me", and "They make me feel pumped or excited".
- **Gender.**

Statistical analyses

Univariate F tests were used to assess gender differences in ratings of the favourite television programs and video games. Because there are 10 variables related to television programs and 12 variables related to video games, a Bonferroni adjustment was made to the standard alpha of .05. For each variable related to television programs the alpha level was set to .005, and for each variable related to video games the alpha was .004. The overall probability of error for each group of tests is therefore not greater than .05.

A Chi2 test was used to assess variation by grade level in the recall of imitative violence.

Linear regression was used to assess the relationship between the dependent variable (kids' perception that media violence can have societal repercussions) and predictors.

RESULTS

Sample demographics

Table 1 shows the gender, language, grade, and province/

Introducing... Our Own Academy Website: A Message From Dr. Luc Morin

Dear Colleagues:

The Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry celebrated its 23rd year of existence with the Annual Meeting just held from November 1st to the 4th in the most welcoming city of Halifax. For the first time, three months before the meeting, we put up on our website the scientific program as well as the meeting and the hotel registration forms. We are now going to use the electronic medium for much of our communication needs with you, with the Canadian people and with other organizations.

You will notice, for instance, in renewing your membership, that there will be an inquiry about your fields of interest. This should lead to further exchanges between Canadian child psychiatrists with similar interests. As the Academy is developing links with other national child and adolescent specialty organizations in a number of countries, our membership will also be better informed and enjoy greater capabilities to create personal and professional friendships.

We are inviting you to peruse through the Academy website for, at this point in time, we are very much in the process of improving it. New software coming soon should delight the web master and his team!

Comments, suggestions and any feedback from you will be very much appreciated.

The address... www.canacad.org.

Chers confrères, consoeurs,

Au cours des dernières années, l'Académie canadienne de psychiatrie de l'enfant et de l'adolescent s'est particulièrement attardée à améliorer le contenu scientifique du congrès annuel et de la Revue canadienne de psychiatrie de l'enfant et de l'adolescent. Plus récemment, nous nous tournons vers notre site Internet conscients que, dans un avenir proche, cet outil de communication sera appelé à jouer un rôle important dans les communications de l'organisation avec ses membres, le public et les pédopsychiatres d'autres pays avec lesquels nous établissons des contacts personnels et professionnels.

Déjà, cette année, pour le 23ième congrès annuel tenu à Halifax, nous avons accès en ligne au contenu du programme de mêmes qu'aux formulaires d'inscription et de réservation d'hôtel. Vous le saurez pour l'an prochain!

Une petite équipe quasi quotidiennement à améliorer le site et désire, pour mieux faire le travail, recevoir vos commentaires et suggestions. N'hésitez surtout pas à nous faire part de ce que vous aimeriez retrouver sur le site.

L'adresse du site... www.canacad.com.

Luc Morin, MD, FRCPC

President, Canadian Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry